

PM's Rally speech about more than just elections

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MPs and political watchers polled say his pitch to voters was restrained

It was billed as an SG50 rally, to take stock of how far the country had come as well as where it might be heading.

But coming in the midst of much talk of an impending general election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech on the Government's achievements and plans for Singapore also struck some as being a clear pitch to the voters for their support at the polls.

Political watchers interviewed yesterday, however, noted that PM Lee had taken pains to do it with some finesse. [Related Story](#)

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They lauded Mr Lee for the restraint he showed in his speech on Sunday. Though he asked Singaporeans to "support (his) team", he did not use words like "vote" or "People's Action Party", they said.

MPs like Mr Hri Kumar Nair did not think the Prime Minister was engaging in electioneering.

Pointing to the policy changes announced at the Rally, such as enhanced measures to encourage parenthood and raising the re-employment age, the MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC said these have been raised in Parliament many times.

"The problem is that people think that anything announced before an election is for an election. But you must measure the Government's track record, and not just what it does three or six months before the general election," he said.

Mr Lee said at the Rally that elections would be called "soon".

Other MPs argued that it was inevitable to recall the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's legacy as it was the first Rally without him. PM Lee had evoked the memory of the late Mr Lee in his Malay, Mandarin and English speeches. While the week of national mourning in March had an impact on many, law don Eugene Tan said the references could be seen as trying to gain political mileage; similarly, in giving "due recognition to the pioneers, who've been a traditional vote bank for the PAP".

But Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng said it would have been strange to omit the late Mr Lee from the speech, as he was instrumental in building the country's successes in the last 50 years.

"The party knows that there would be a backlash if it was seen to be exploiting his death. But the late Mr Lee was and is a symbol of the PAP and Singapore; even if there wasn't an election this year, I'm sure he would have been mentioned," Mr Baey said.

PM Lee had also urged Singaporeans to "be alive" to their external environment, or risk the country's survival. Ongoing troubles in Malaysia and Indonesia could affect the country, he

said. It was a topic he had "spoken too little" about in recent rallies because of the focus on domestic affairs, he added.

As the PAP tends to do better at the polls in times of economic uncertainty, some had accused PM Lee of scare-mongering.

No, said Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad: "What Mr Lee mentioned were facts and market realities. Perhaps, recent developments caused him to speak up: The last few months has seen an acceleration of developments in our neighbours, like the ringgit dropping."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said the PAP can have its cake and eat it: "They can introduce measures that address long-term concerns, but which also have the right political signature, especially just before an election." For example, a new scheme to help second-timer rental households buy a flat will address the opposition's criticism that Singapore is not an egalitarian society, she noted .

Dr Koh also said the Rally could have taken a more partisan tone.

"PM Lee could have attacked the Workers' Party (WP) by talking about clean governance and being corruption-free, but he didn't," she said, referring to the ongoing spat between the WP's town council and the Government.

Rather, his electioneering was fairly subtle, in noting the diplomacy skills of Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say, she said.

"The subtext is: Let's not lose another minister."

People who watched the Rally on TV or read about it told The Straits Times they saw PM Lee's speech more as an update on where the country stood at this juncture than an election appeal.

Said business development executive Jerr Lim, 46: "It was a summary update of what was done during Mr Lee Kuan Yew's era, and how PM Lee wants to continue that legacy."

He was among 20 people interviewed who welcomed the housing and parenthood measures. But more can be done, they added.

Still, some like financial adviser Melissa Tan, 29, found other aspects of the Rally moving, especially when Kit Chan sang Home.

"I was at the National Day Parade and I feel that Singaporeans have found an identity with the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew," she said.

The part of PM's message that resonated with teacher Noryn Abdul Wahab, 44, was: Singaporeans need to continually improve for the country to stay ahead.